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SUBJECT: SERBIA PULLS OUT OF NATO EXERCISE IN GEORGIA

REF: A) USNATO 156 B) BELGRADE 246 C) 08 BELGRADE 1333

Summary

1. (SBU) Serbia's government decided on April 30 not to participate in an upcoming NATO/PFP exercise in Georgia. The decision was a direct result of pressure from Russia on Serbia, and was taken despite Serbia's previous intention to participate in the exercise. Serbia's last minute pull-out from the exercise is further evidence of Russia's continued ability to influence Serbia as a result of growing economic ties between the two and Russia's support for Serbia on Kosovo. We should expect to see Russia use its leverage again on Serbia in the future. End Summary.

Government Back Tracks on Exercise

2. (SBU) Despite longstanding commitments to participate, at its weekly session on April 30 Serbia's government decided not to send two officers to the NATO PFP exercise Cooperative Longbow 2009, scheduled to take place in Georgia beginning May 6. Serbia's participation was included in Serbia's 2009-2010 Individual Partnership Program with NATO.

Russia Exerts Pressure

3. (SBU) The government decision was in response to Russian Ambassador Konuzin's request to Foreign Affairs Minister Vuk Jeremic that Serbia not participate in the exercise due to ongoing tensions between Russia and Georgia. "Neither our troops, nor our staff, nor anyone else from Serbia will be taking part in the NATO exercise in Georgia. The reason for that is because the Russian Federation has outlined its position that this exercise constitutes a security threat to her," Jeremic said to local media B92 on April 28. Jeremic added that Serbia would not participate in any project that constituted a security threat to Russia.

Comment

4. (SBU) This incident demonstrates that despite the Serbian government's focus on European integration, Russia's clout in Belgrade remains strong. Gazprom's December 2008 purchase of Serbia's national oil company NIS has given Russia even more levers of influence. This is further compounded by the perceived necessity by some within the Serbian government, particularly Jeremic, to keep Russia on its side regarding Kosovo's independence. We can expect Russia to flex its influence upon Serbia again when it is in Russia's geostrategic interest. End Comment.

MUNTER